

VZCZCXRO5000
OO RUEHCI
DE RUEHKA #0534/01 1361018
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 151018Z MAY 08
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6763
INFO RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 8446
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 2174
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 9681
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0647
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 1295
RHHMUNA/USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000534

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/FO AND SCA/PB

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/11/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [EAID](#) [EAGR](#) [PHUM](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: BOUCHER ENCOURAGES BANGLADESH TO STICK TO ELECTION
TIMETABLE AND INSTITUTIONALIZE REFORMS

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

Summary
=====

¶1. (C) During his May 8 - 10 visit to Bangladesh, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher emphasized the importance of free, fair and credible elections by the end of 2008. Boucher urged the Caretaker Government to remove the State of Emergency and to work with the political parties to ensure the continuity of long due institutional reforms. The Chief Adviser and the Chief of Army Staff assured Boucher of their commitment to free, fair and credible parliamentary elections this year. Bangladeshi interlocutors expressed appreciation for the development assistance provided by the United States, including following 2007's Cyclone Sidr but also pressed for enhanced market access for the country's exports. Boucher and visiting Counterterrorism Coordinator Dell Dailey urged Bangladeshi interlocutors to strengthen anti-terrorism and anti-money laundering laws. For their part, Bangladeshi officials pledged support for our joint counterterrorism agenda and expressed hope that bilateral cooperation in this area would expand. The Boucher and Dailey visits underscored the importance which the United States attaches to Bangladesh's transition as the Caretaker Government prepares for the final months of its tenure.

Bangladesh Rolls Out the Red Carpet for Boucher Visit
=====

¶2. (C) Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher met with a wide range of senior government officials and representatives of political parties. His official meetings included sessions with Chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, Chief of Army Staff General Moeen Uddin Ahmed, Foreign Secretary Touhid Hossain, Home Secretary Abdul Karim, and Election Commissioner Shakawat Hossain. Boucher also met with senior leaders from all the major political parties and a cross section of civil society opinion makers. For the meetings with the Chief Adviser, Army Chief, and Foreign Secretary, Boucher was joined by visiting Counterterrorism Coordinator Dell Dailey, whose May 7 - 9 visit will be reported septel. Prior to his departure, Boucher spoke to the media at a press conference organized by the Embassy, and his visit received widespread coverage in both the electronic and print media.

Elections Promised by End of 2008
=====

¶3. (C) Government officials assured Boucher that elections

would take place before the end of 2008. They also confirmed that registration of Bangladesh's 80 million eligible voters would be finalized by October. Interlocutors shared details of the ongoing political dialogue and stressed efforts were underway to reform the electoral system to reduce the influence of "money, muscle power, and misuse of authority." At the same time, all agreed reforms were also needed within the parties. Boucher emphasized the importance of lifting the state of emergency to allow for free, fair and credible elections. General Moeen told Boucher and Dailey he was committed to elections this year, barring any unforeseen cataclysmic event. On May 12, the Chief Advisor in a nationally broadcast speech set the Parliamentary polls for the third week in December and announced a gradual relaxation of restrictions on political activities.

¶4. (C) In a meeting with representatives from key parties, political party leaders across the political spectrum underlined the importance of holding elections this year and restoring democracy. Several said the success of elections depended on the release of the two imprisoned former prime ministers, Awami League President Sheikh Hasina and Bangladesh Nationalist Party Chairwoman Khaleda Zia, charged with corruption by the Caretaker Government. Not surprisingly, the two parties argued that two ladies must be allowed to participate in the electoral process and must have transparent trials that followed due process. Assistant Secretary Boucher characterized Bangladesh's political prospects as "fairly positive" and promised the USG would "be there supporting you" on the fundamental issues of elections and democracy.

DHAKA 00000534 002 OF 003

Continuity of Reforms Must be Assured

=====

¶5. (C) There was widespread agreement among the party leaders that the Anti Corruption Commission, Election Commission, National Human Rights Commission, and Public Services Commission needed to remain independent and vibrant in order to avoid a return to the status quo before the Caretaker Government came to office in January 2007. Boucher stressed the importance of continuity of reforms and reaffirmed our willingness to work with Bangladesh to strengthen these institutions, noting it was important for the political parties to buy into the reforms.

¶6. (C) While the politicians applauded many of the Caretaker Government's political reforms, they argued its agenda was overly ambitious. Most important, they said, was to lay the foundation for long-term political reform upon which future governments could build. For their part, the leaders from the Caretaker Government also stressed the importance of reforms. The Army Chief highlighted the potential role the proposed national security council could play by acting as an advisory body which would include both military and civilian members.

Development Assistance Focus on Food and Trade

=====

¶7. (C) Fakhruddin Ahmed and others expressed appreciation for the assistance provided by the United States in the wake of 2007's Cyclone Sidr. Government officials noted the importance of food security, which would require rebuilding government food stocks despite an expected bumper harvest in the near term. The Foreign Secretary stressed that Bangladesh was eager to qualify for assistance through the Millennium Challenge Corporation. The Caretaker Government was also concerned about the prospect of losing market access because of the petition filed by labor groups in the United States to remove the Generalized System of Preferences. At the same time, Bangladesh hoped to receive enhanced market access as a beneficiary of trade legislation currently pending before Congress. Boucher replied that a return to democracy would help Bangladesh make the case for additional

assistance. He agreed to look into the request that Bangladesh's existing bilateral debt (from old food aid programs) be converted into a grant or forgiven as part of a "debt for nature" swap.

¶8. (C) Boucher promised we would look at ways to help Bangladesh meet its food requirements to recover from the cyclone. He stressed that keeping to the election timetable would also bolster investor and business confidence. Assistant Secretary Boucher explained the importance of market incentives and policy reforms that would encourage farmers to produce more food. The Ambassador also pointed out flaws in the Bangladesh government's tendering system that made it difficult for them to procure wheat from major producers, including United States.

Strong Commitment to Counterterrorism Cooperation =====

¶9. (C) Boucher and Dailey expressed a desire to work across the board with Bangladesh to fight extremism, noting that success in this country could serve as an example for others. The Ambassador and Boucher stressed the importance of Bangladeshi efforts to strengthen anti-money laundering laws and to pass an anti-terrorism ordinance. For their part, Bangladeshi officials pointed to the speed and efficiency with which they responded to the nation-wide terrorist bombings in 2005. They acknowledged a need to improve legislation and also to strengthen regional cooperation, including better information sharing with neighbors. Boucher said the United States hoped to find a way to work with the Rapid Action Battalion consistent with legislative provisions related to human rights. The Chief Adviser reiterated his commitment to ending human rights abuses by security forces. Counterterrorism cooperation would be facilitated by our strong military-military relationship, he noted, which included the valuable role that the Bangladeshi military had played in peacekeeping operations.

Media Coverage On Visit Is Positive =====

DHAKA 00000534 003 OF 003

¶10. (C) Boucher's visit received widespread and mainly positive coverage during his two day visit. The coverage keyed on his strong support for implementation of the election roadmap and his call for the lifting of the State of Emergency. Others commented on Boucher's meeting with the parties, noting that he had met with representatives of all major parties, including the major Islamic party. Septel will provide detailed analysis of the press coverage of the visit.

Comment =====

¶11. (C) The timing of Assistant Secretary Boucher's visit to Bangladesh was ideal, coming so soon after the Ambassador's presentation of credentials and introductory calls on senior officials. Boucher's public and private messages reinforced our statements over the past year and echoed what the Ambassador had said in his initial meetings. From the Bangladeshi officials we heard a clear commitment to holding elections by the end of the year. The visit also underscored that there are no really contentious bilateral issues, and that our assistance programs have earned us a great deal of good will. Finally, our message on counterterrorism was reinforced by both Boucher and Dailey's visits. Boucher's clear message will buttress those within the government who are committed to holding elections on schedule while continuing to institutionalize the reforms necessary for a healthy and prosperous democracy.

¶12. (U) Assistant Secretary Boucher has cleared this message.

Moriarty